

Hisham Al-Omeisy interview on CNN January 11th, 2024
CNN: The Houthi rebels are one of the Iranian proxies likely to come up and talk, as Blinken visits the Middle East. While they've ramped up their attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea in recent months. And this map that you see here shows all the attacks on vessels between November and December of last year. The Houthis say the attacks are retaliation for Israel's war against Hamas. Joining me now is Hisham Al-Omeisy. He's a conflict analyst and the senior Yemen advisor with the European Institute of Peace, a very good day, Mr. Hisham Al-Omeisy. Can you help unpack for us what the recent Houthi naval attacks in the Red Sea mean for Yemen, the region and the world at large?
Hisham Al-Omeisy: Definitely. They've been planning this for a while. A lot of people forget that the Houthis happened at war in Yemen for the past nine years. And they've been trying and attempting to control the better part of the country since 2015. And now that they have control over the Red Sea, they've been waiting for a golden opportunity where they can advance their goals further in terms of enhancing their persona and the region as the vanguard of the Muslim and the Arab world in terms of extracting concessions from regional countries, the Gulf cooperation countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. But also now they've moved internationally where they were also strong on the international community. And they will continue to do this for the forthcoming a few months because it increases their legitimacy regionally.
CNN: Right. So you predict that this will actually keep happening. I mean, we're already seeing some of the biggest shipping companies in the world now avoiding the area altogether. The Houthis remain defiant. Are the Houthis able to brush off the increasing international pressure they're facing from the likes of the US, the UK and so forth?
Hisham Al-Omeisy: Yes, they will. The Houthis for the past nine years have been fighting off a Saudi-led coalition which was backed by the US and other Western states, which they have managed for better or worse to basically win over even more territory inside Yemen. So they will definitely brush it off. They are looking for this opportunity for this escalation because they want to advance their own goals. This conflict, this escalation, basically serves to rile up their local base and increases their footprint and it is also a low-cost conflict for Iran, their backers, to fight indirectly with the US. So they will definitely continue to do that.
CNN: Now, this is turning out to be a big challenge for the US. As you know, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is in the region as we speak and he'll also meet with Gulf nations. What are the challenges for the US when it comes to dealing with Houthis and what is an asymmetrical maritime warfare?
Hisham Al-Omeisy: It's very extremely difficult because for the Houthis it's very cheap. They're launching \$1,200 worth of drones and speedboats that they've actually built locally and they're very low-cost. They could launch hundreds of those in a matter of weeks. In turn, for the US and for the alliance, it's very expensive to defend against those drones, costs about \$1.5 million and it's going to be exponentially expensive to basically fend off those drones. And if the coalition, the alliance decides to basically bomb Yemen or have boots on the ground, it will bolster the Houthis legitimacy. Not just locally in Yemen but also regionally. Soon enough, you'll have fighters from Iraq, from Syria, from the Arab world, even from Somalia, joining Yemenis because there's a lot of sympathizers with Gaza, the Arabs see them as the underdog. So it will escalate and it will regionalize the conflict. So there's a high cost there.
CNN: Right. You mentioned the Gaza there because the Houthis say that they're targeting vessels who are either linked or are going to Israel and that they are doing this in solidarity with the Palestinians. Is there truth to that? I mean, is that their objective?
Hisham Al-Omeisy: To be honest with you, they're riding a wave of discontent, a popular Arab Islamic popular discontent with how the Arab leaders in the Arab states did not react enough towards Gaza, did not protect the Palestinians enough. So they're riding that wave. But the Houthis have their own motives. The Houthis want to act on their motto, the motto that they've been propagating for the past eight years, which is the American ??? to Israel. So this provided a golden opportunity to act upon that motto. Second thing, they want to extract concessions from Saudi Arabia because they currently are in negotiations, peace negotiations with Saudi Arabia. So by flexing their muscles in the Red Sea, they can extract more from the Saudis for that deal. Third, and most importantly, they want to have international legitimacy. Now they're telling the world that we exist. We are present and will basically be a thorn on your side until we basically furnish our requests. So they have other motives, not just defending the Palestinians.
CNN: Right. They have their own objectives, if I understand you correctly. I mean, nine years now, since the Yemen war began devastating, the people of Yemen, the entire country, what does this all mean now for peace negotiations that were underway and were very promising? But we now see, as you've explained, this escalate further and spark a wider war.
Hisham Al-Omeisy: The Saudis, I mean, we've been getting word for the past two weeks from Riyadh that the Saudis have been trying to deescalate the situation. They are not chocking??? out the deal yet. There are some other negotiations with the Houthis. Tim Linde King actually the US envoy is coming to the region the next week to kind of try and salvage that deal. The Saudis have been trying to exit Yemen. Yemen has been Saudi's Vietnam, if you will, and they've been trying to extract themselves from that conflict and trying to strike that deal. So they will look for ways to compromise with the Houthis. And this is one of the reasons why the Saudis did not join the US-led coalition in the Red Sea, because they did not want to antagonize the Houthis. And hopefully, we will hear something back within the next two weeks, unless, I don't know, otherwise, if the alliance attacks Yemen, they have boots on the ground, then it's really going to derail all those peace negotiations that have been building up for the past six months.
CNN: Hisham Al Umayyse, thank you so much for joining us.
Hisham Al-Omeisy: Thank you for having me, Laila.
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